Hey, I Can Do That—
A Public Policy Career

Jodie Curtis, Government Relations Director, Drinker Biddle Reath, Washington, DC

Nurse practitioners (NPs) are natural advocates. Every day, they work with patients to protect their rights and support their health care goals. This advocacy role, however, does not have to end at the patient’s bedside. It can proceed to the front seats of a local town hall meeting and continue through the halls of Congress and rise to the ranks of the Executive Branch.

As health care professionals, NPs know that decisions made by policymakers in Washington, DC, have a direct impact on their ability to deliver high-quality care. One of the most important things an NP can do is to seek to influence these decisions.

As we have seen, NPs have been instrumental in organizing grassroots initiatives, attending town hall meetings, organizing Capitol Hill Days, and making their voices heard. NPs have met with their representatives, at both state and national levels, and educated their Members of Congress on issues affecting their communities.

Many NPs have enjoyed these advocacy experiences and may be wondering how to become further involved in public policy initiatives affecting the NP community. For those who are interested, there are several different ways to become involved, such as seeking a position as a congressional intern, legislative fellow, or staffer, or working in a federal agency, like the Department of Health and Human Services.

Many people begin their legislative career as interns on Capitol Hill, working for a Representative or Senator from their home state or for a Member of Congress who sits on a Committee or Subcommittee of jurisdiction over health-related issues. While these positions are often unpaid and dominated by undergraduate and graduate students, an internship on Capitol Hill is an excellent way to gain experience in the legislative process and begin a professional life in public policy.

An NP who possesses a master’s or professional degree and has completed a successful internship or has some pre-existing public policy background may apply for a position as a Congressional Legislative Health Fellowship, a 9-month office placement usually sponsored by a foundation or research institute, such as the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Heritage Foundation, or Brookings Institute. As a Congressional Fellow, the individual may be responsible for researching public policy, drafting policy briefs, and crafting op-ed articles for his or her Member’s office.

A gradual progression for an NP who has completed an internship or fellowship is to apply for a more permanent position as a health legislative assistant (LA) in a Congressional office. A health LA is responsible for reviewing and briefing the office on all legislation within his/her issue area.

An NP who is interested in public policy but dislikes the unpredictability of a staffer’s work on Capitol Hill might be advised to pursue working for a federal government agency. For example, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid (CMS) has positions available for nurse consultants who review, analyze, and evaluate the quality and effectiveness of services delivered by Medicare and Medicaid providers.

NPs are competitive candidates for Congressional and federal health policy positions, as they possess a unique blend of both practical and academic experiences related to health care. For information, search the following websites before inquiring with a Member of Congress’ office: www.rollcall.com, www.thehill.com, www.thewashingtonpost.com, and www.bradtraverse.com. For opportunities in the federal government, search www.usajobs.gov.

NPs Finally Listed in 2010 Federal SOC

It only took 10 years of effort from a very vigilant group of NPs to get the occupation of “nurse practitioner” to be added to the Federal 2010 Standard Occupational Classifications (SOC). This news was published in the January 21, 2009, issue of Federal Register.

The SOC reflects the current occupational structure of the United States, classifying all occupations in which work is performed for pay or profit. The SOC covers all jobs in the national economy, including occupations in the public, private, and military sectors. All federal agencies that publish occupational data for statistical purposes are required to use the SOC to increase data comparability.